**Learn Perfect Spanish Pronunciation: 11 Problem Sounds That Make You Sound Like a Gringo**

**1. General Consonant Issues**

All Spanish consonants follow strict rules for the sounds they make, and there are few exceptions. The sound a consonant makes only changes when it’s combined with certain consonants and vowels—and even this is fairly straightforward. There aren’t nearly as many combinations and irregularities as there are with English sounds.

While many consonants are pronounced the same in Spanish as they are in English, one common mistake made by non-native speakers is over-enunciating the consonants in Spanish words. Consonants in Spanish are pronounced more softly, by and large, and we’ll take a look at many specifics throughout the rest of this list.

**2. General Vowel Issues**

Spanish vowels are pronounced the same every time. Every. Single. Time. Learn ah, eh, ee, oh, oo, and you’re golden. [Watch this handy video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orOW9eRQfpE), listen to it several times and practice those vowel sounds until you get them down pat. Like the lady says, “cinco vocales, cinco sonidos” (five vowels, five sounds).

But when you practice, be sure to pay attention to the length of the vowel sound. Spanish vowels are pronounced shorter, more abruptly. In English, we tend to let vowels drag on.

For example, many English speakers pronounce hola, which has two short and sweet vowels, as ooouulaaah. They let the o and a drag on for far too long. Instead, try giving each vowel in hola a half-second of sound. Short and sweet.

And just because the vowels are short doesn’t mean they’re not strongly pronounced. Oh, no. Open your mouth wide when you pronounce these vowels. To say the letter a you should have your jaw dropped, and i requires you to stretch your mouth wide and be almost grinning. For o and u your mouth should be open wide with rounded lips. Keeping your mouth open wide for pronouncing vowels is key to sounding natural.

Keep practicing this with every Spanish word you encounter.

**3. Accent Marks**

[Accent marks are extremely helpful](http://www.fluentu.com/spanish/blog/spanish-accent-marks/). Misplacing or forgetting an accent can make a big difference in the meaning of your Spanish sentences. For example, ésta, esta and está each have different meanings, and you’ll need to stress the right syllable when speaking.

If there’s a long word that you’re not sure about, check for an accent place on the word. [Forvo](http://www.forvo.com/languages/es/) is a great internet tool for checking Spanish pronunciation, because they’ll often give you different regional pronunciations. Also, Google Translate is pretty great for this purpose—but it occasionally doesn’t get the sounds quite right.

**4. B/V**

The difference between “b” and “v” in English is obvious. In spoken Spanish, b and v are indistinguishable, and they both sound exactly like the English letter “b” in most situations.

In fact, many native Spanish speakers confuse them, particularly speakers who haven’t received extensive education regarding reading and writing.

When the b or v comes at the beginning of a word, or when it follows the letter m or n, pronounce it like the letter “b” in the English word “ball.” This is a deep, rounded b sound. In any other word, you’ll step into the waters of truly foreign pronunciation—the letters b and v do something strange. Try to pronounce “b” as in “ball” without letting your lips come together. That’s your sound.

For example, try pronouncing the word escoba (broom) without letting your lips touch. Your Spanish b here should not sound like the “b” in “ball.” If you can master that, you’ve eliminated one distinctly gringo problem sound.

**5. Cl**

Cl makes us English speakers sound totally graceless. We spent far too much time attempting to enunciate both the c and the l. In Spanish, cl has a very graceful, elegant sound. That’s because it’s rather softly and swiftly pronounced.

To illustrate, try saying the English word “clomp.” You likely made a very hard “c” sound and lingered on the “l.” The tongue sticks to the roof of the mouth, hangs out there and produces a strong, muddy-sounding “l.” This is typical of English, but not of Spanish.

Now let’s swap “clomp” for aclarar (to clarify) or claro (clear). Try pronouncing these words by reducing the entire cl sound to a half a second. Just half a second. Your tongue should only gently tap the roof of your mouth, and then you quick and gracefully lilt on to the following a.

Got that one down? You’re one step closer to speaking with a clean, crisp Spanish accent.

**6. C/S**

The letter c will be pronounced like the Spanish letter s when followed by the vowels e and i. When followed by the vowels a, o, u or a consonant, you’ll use a hard c.

The trick is to get the hard c correct. We English speakers take our hard “c” very seriously. It’s a strong sound, and is accompanied by breath rushing out of your mouth. Pronounce the English word “accommodate” strongly. Did you feel the air leaving your mouth when you hit the hard “c” sound? If not, try again—it’s happening.

The different with the Spanish hard c is that no air should leave your mouth due to its pronunciation. Test this out with the Spanish acomodar (to accomodate). This should be crisply pronounced, and no time should be spent lingering on the hard c.

Got it? Good. On to the next one!

**7. D**

Oh, the letter d. This is a huge sticking point for any would-be Spanish speaker who’s a native English speaker. I’d say that this English letter is partially responsible for Americans having a crap-tastic accent in any language. Our strongly and deeply pronounced English “d”—which sounds just like Homer Simpson’s “D’oh!”—sounds so darn inelegant.

When we say a word like “donut,” we open our mouths wide and our tongues loll about. Try saying that word. Pay attention to your tongue. In Spanish, we always want to strive to pronounce the Spanish letter d just like the “d” in “didn’t.” Thanks to the letter “i,” perhaps, this letter “d” tends to stick to the tips of our tongues. Try saying this word compared to “donut” and feel the difference in your tongue’s positioning and movement. “Didn’t” hardly requires your tongue to move at all.

Try using this softer, lighter pronunciation of “d” for the Spanish word donar (to donate). Don’t let that tongue move around! Keep it towards your front teeth.

Another trick with the Spanish d is when it comes at the end of a word in the form of –ado or –ada. For example, pescado (fish) or enamorada (in love). In Carribbean and coastal regions (among a few others), you’ll likely never hear the –ado or –ada fully pronounced. Pescado sounds like pescao.

That’s the most extreme version, but anywhere you go in the Spanish-speaking world you’ll find that this final syllable is always pronounced softly—it’s virtally nonexistant, to the point where your tongue shouldn’t move at all or touch anything in your mouth to make this sound. The d should be very hard to hear. If you’re pronouncing the do in pescado like the “do” in “donut,” you’ve got yourself a problem.

**8. G/J/Gua**

Ah, a timeless office lunch room debate—do you pronounce the g in guacamole? Well, do you?

When the Spanish letter g precedes u, a or a consonant, it’s a bit like the hard English “g” found in “grape” or “gorilla.” The only difference from this English letter “g” sound is, as with any Spanish consonants, the Spanish g is pronounced a bit softer.

Before moving on with the letter g and its pronunciations, let’s take a look at the Spanish letter j. The letter j has a breathy “h” sound, like the “h” in “house.” You may already know this thanks to Spanish loan words in English—for example, how do you pronounce jalapeño? Exactly: ha-la-payn-yoh.

Okay, let’s get back to that tricky letter g.

When g precedes i or e, it’s a soft g and pronounced like the Spanish letter j. That means that the same breathy g sound is used in the words Japón (Japan), girasol (sunflower) and germinar (germinate).

Now, does that mean we pronounce the g sound in guacamole? Nope. It turns out that the pair gu comes with its own set of rules. When gu is followed by an i, e, or o, as in pingüino (penguin), guerra (war) and antiguo (old), respectively, the g is hard. Formal Spanish rules might dictate that gua follow suit, but the spoken pronunciation is typically whua.

That means aguacate (avocado), guacamole and Guayaquil (Ecuadorian city) are all pronounced with a whua sound.

**9. H**

So, I’m willing to bet that you already know about this letter being silent. It’s pretty basic stuff. However, this is commonly forgotten by learners when speaking Spanish. You hit certain words like almohada (pillow) or ahora (now) and it just doesn’t make sense not to pronounce it. But you still don’t pronounce it.

When you see h in a word, pretend it doesn’t exist unless it’s in a ch combo. Oh, or unless it’s in a funny loanword like hámster.

**10. R/RR**

You know what I’m about to tell you, because rolling your rr‘s can be tricky business. You might even want to blame your genetics, since some people have tongues with more limited mobility. But if the majority of Spanish speakers out there can do it, so can you.

A single r should almost sound like the Spanish d or like the English “d” sound in “udder.”

It’s on the tip of your tongue, not in the back of your throat like the English letter “r.” Let’s demonstrate this by saying the English word “urn.” Hold the r sound for 5 seconds. Where does that come from? You’ll probably notice that this is a rumbling sound that echos from deep within your mouth and throat. I don’t ever want to hear you use that in Spanish.

Now, once you finally master the rr tongue roll, don’t get overenthusiastic and use it where you shouldn’t. For example pero (but) and perro (dog) are distinguished by their very different r sounds.

I once had a friend who used rr everywhere, and went so far as to ask a restaurant server “¿Tiene morro?” (Do you have sass?) instead of “¿Tiene moro?” (Do you have [the delicious rice-and-beans dish moro?](http://www.fluentu.com/spanish/blog/spanish-restaurant-vocabulary-words-phrases/)). Oops!

**11. L/LL**

Welcome to the first—and only—Spanish consonant that I’ll tell you to pronounce more strongly. We have a dainty “l” sound in English that doesn’t exist in Spanish. This is the delicate “l” you see in “delicate” and “listen.” Feel where your tongue goes when you pronounce these two words out loud—it shouldn’t go far. This sound is made with the tippy-top of the tongue lightly pressed against your front teeth.

Instead, the Spanish l is lovingly pronounced and often lingered on. To start with, it’s always pronounced like the sticky English “l” seen in the words “English,” “glob” and “love.” Your tongue should be pressing against the roof of your mouth to make these sounds, created a rich, hollow tone.

While you still want to keep your vowels short, you can pause and linger on the letter l in words like hola and loco. Or even, “¡hola, loco!”

That wacky ll letter is a whole different ball game. It’s also notorious for changing drastically across regions. Generally, it’s pronounced like the English letter “y” in “yell.” So, the Spanish word pollo (chicken) sounds like poy-yoh.

In areas with large indigenous populations and other particular regions, this may sound more like the “li” in “reptilian.” That makes pollo sound like poll-yo instead of the usual poy-yo. In much of Argentina and some other regions, ll sounds like a cross between ja and sh or ch—or like the “zsa” in Zsa Zsa Gabor. This is really just fun trivia unless you’re traveling to these regions—you should always stick with pronouncing ll as “y” unless the locals are peer pressuring you to change it up.

So, you’ve made it to the very end! If you can master all the above points, your Spanish will start to sound incredibly natural.

It won’t be long before someone asks you, “Eh, ¿De qué parte de España eres?” (What part of Spain are you from?).